Not feminine enough? Rachel Cusk's highly-feminised world and unfeminine characters in Saving Agnes and The Country Life

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Introduction

Rachel Cusk's first novels were published in the second part of the 1990s, at a time when British women's fiction was considered "parochial", "insular" and "piddling,"[1] prompting some intellectuals such as Elaine Showalter and David Lodge to react. However, at first reading, her texts may be unlikely to contradict the long-lasting view that women writers tend to write about women and for women. Her debut novel *Saving Agnes* (1993)[2] is an introspective novel on Agnes Day, "sub-editor, suburbanite, failure *extraordinaire.*" (12) It is exemplary of Rachel Cusk's fiction, in that it interweaves a seemingly uneventful plot with a realistic depiction of the characters' inner thoughts, by using a style chiselled with precision and dark humour. This can easily be seen as the epitome of what is often rejected as feminine, all the more so as Cusk's attempts at entering the male psyche can fairly be said to have proven less successful,[3] or at least less frequent,[4] Contradicting E. Showalter's assertion that British female authors tend to shun away from theory and feminist thinkers from fiction,[5] Cusk has gradually sought to have a sociopolitical voice of her own, which is why we may wonder why she has not been given prominence in contemporary research works so far. In addition to her contributions to *The Guardian*, her fiction is peppered with political, feminist views that use humour as a way of debunking the feminine ideal which is constructed in the text, a straightjacket of convention in which the female characters are stuck. Cusk's characters are trying to build a sense of self that is not completely based on the stereotypical characteristics of

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[1] These are the words used by Lola Young, professor of cultural studies at Middlesex University and Orange Prize judge (Showalter, 1999).

[2] *Saving Agnes* will be referred to as *SA* between brackets and *The Country Life* (1997) as *CL*.

[3] John Mullan relates *In the Fold* (2005) to Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* and Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* (2004) in an interview with Rachel Cusk, available on the Guardian website. "A male personality" is what Cusk, in that interview, says she wanted to capture, proving that her former production mainly focused on women.

[4] There are mainly three male characters in *The Temporary* (1995), *In the Fold* and *The Bradshaw Variations* (2009a).

[5] "Unfortunately, while French women intellectuals have always alternated between the novel and the essay as expressive forms, in Britain intellectual women often shun the novel as a frivolous genre. […] we don't see fiction by British feminist intellectuals such as Margaret Walters, Germaine Greer, Rachel Bowlby or Lisa Jardine. Moreover, the number of options now open to women writers, and especially the flourishing genre of biography, has absorbed some talents that might otherwise go to fiction, including Claire Tomalin and Hermione Lee. Ironically, women in the 1890s turned to the novel because they could not be dons or politicians or industrialists or clergy; now those roles may be absorbing some of the most innovative minds." (Showalter 1999)

womanhood, which are taken for granted. Seeing the body as a situation, a place of interconnection (Tang 2013), Cusk, with a sarcasm that is redolent of Sylvia Plath's, or Virginia Woolf's,[6] observes and dissects a highly feminised world in which her characters are at their wits' end as to how they could correspond to the cliché, as they find themselves incapable of breaking the rules of convention. Whether it be in the hyper-realist world of *Arlington Park* (2006) or in the modern, Gothic world of *The Country Life*, Cusk's characters need to be saved from the dissolution of identity and the disconnection of human relationships.

Using both her own reflection on the woman writer's work in "Shakespeare's Daughters" and her fiction, this article tries to show how femininity in these works is constructed as difference, not in the sense of a difference from men, but in the sense of an attempt at articulating an awareness of a self that is not wholly stereotypical, by grounding it in the individual experience of having a body that is female. French theorists have emphasised the role played by the body in shaping subjectivity (Beauvoir 1976; Kristeva 1969; Lacan 1975). Moreover, Cusk's thematic choices were promoted to the rank of a deliberate engagement in her recent feminist manifesto published in *The Guardian*:

> in my own experience as a writer, it is in the places where honesty is most required – because it is here that compromise and false consciousness and "mystification" continue to endanger the integrity of a woman's life – that it is most vehemently rejected. I am talking, of course, about the book of repetition, about fiction that concerns itself with what is eternal and unvarying, with domesticity and motherhood and family life. The sheer intolerance, in 2009, for these subjects is the unarguable proof that woman is on the verge of surrendering important aspects of her modern identity. (Cusk 2009)

This article addresses the relation between the apparent saturation of feminine themes and the political implications of Rachel Cusk's fiction.

A Highly Feminised World

Rachel Cusk's main characters are often female and display at least one of the traditional attributes of femininity: they are seductive (*Saving Agnes*, *The Temporary*, *The Country Life*), dangerous and enigmatic (the mothers in Egypt Farm in *In the Fold*), or perfect housewives (*Arlington Park*), and by choosing an introspective mode of narration, Cusk only reinforces the feminine aspect of her work.[7] Her early novels depict young, successful female characters that, for some reason, have failed to live up to society's expectations and end up as marginal, yet conventional women.

[6] For an analysis of the resemblance of Woolf's and Plath's sarcasm, see Boileau 2010, "Voir le réel en face et en rire. *Moments of Being* de Virginia Woolf et *The Bell Jar* de Sylvia Plath".

[7] E. Showalter quotes the judgments on the British New Woman novel from 1890 and asserts its conflation to the contemporary judgment of Lola Young, "[t]he verdict on the British women's novel of the 90s is pretty grim: a 'disproportionate emphasis placed on female sexuality'; an 'interminable flood of gaseous chatter'; a 'feminisation of the literary marketplace', with best-sellers setting the style, and publishers beating the drum for endlessly repeated stories of thirtysomething, single career women worrying about marriage, men and maternity leave. If 'the novel as a work of art is disappearing... the reason is that more and more in our modern age, novels are written by women for women'." (Showalter 1999)

Agnes Day, Francine Snaith or Stella Benson are young, pretty, educated girls who might look successful (they have jobs, flats and money), but who do not fit: Agnes Day's career as an assistant editor of the "illustrious" (*SA*, 9) *Diplomat's Week* proves unsatisfactory and cumbersome: "Soon [she] came to feel that she was not so much assisting as getting in the way." (9) Francine Snaith's temporary work together with her dysfunctional relationship tend to somewhat qualify the image she may have as well.

It is, however, in *The Country Life* that such a situation is literalised for the first time, since the novel opens on its heroine's decision to leave London and the paraphernalia of urban life, to go and live in the countryside where she is going to assist parents with their disabled child. As Moretti says, "the crossing of a spatial border is usually the decisive event of the narrative structure." (Moretti 1998, 46) Multiple borders are crossed in the first chapters as Stella moves away from the capital city, where she is a married solicitor with friends and family, to the countryside where, incidentally, not only does she work in a large house which is quite isolated from the village (chapter 5), but she also lives in a cottage adjoining the main house. The slow progress of the narration that describes the minute details of the character's inner thoughts, arrival and multiple *faux-pas* across five chapters enables us to have a sense of these multiple borders that she crosses within the first hours of her settling in. Because of this novelistic construction, Cusk relates with the current feminist trend, which is concerned with borders, geography and situatedness: "[f]rom an earlier emphasis on silence and invisibility, feminism has moved to a concern with location – the geopolitics of identity within differing communal spaces of being and becoming." (Friedman 1998, 3)

However, these multiple borders that at first sight look like steps that the heroine takes to get away from her womanly thraldom prove a strategy of entrapment that Cusk deems typical of the twenty-first century woman's scorn for feminist issues:

> [i]f a woman feels suffocated and grounded and bewildered by her womanhood, she feels these things alone, as an individual: there is currently no public unity among women, because since the peak of feminism the task of woman has been to assimilate herself with man. She is, therefore, occluded, scattered, disguised. Were a woman writer to address her sex, she would not know who or what she was addressing. Superficially this situation resembles equality, except that it occurs within the domination of "masculine values". What today's woman has gained in personal freedom she has lost in political caste. Hers is still the second sex, but she has earned the right to dissociate herself from it. (Cusk 2009b)

Cusk's characters reveal above all the individuality of woman's experience in that general context of a masculine world that is a given. Stella Benson finds herself all alone in the cottage of a large house in the countryside, where she explores her own identity, which cannot be separated from her gender, and yet cannot be reduced to it. What is worth noting is that none of these women are sufficiently atypical as to become outcasts, but they remain on the margins, as their jobs as assistants or secretaries metaphorically imply: Stella is a solicitor but she introduces herself to the Maddens and the readers as a secretary. The novels are based on an exploration of a submitted form of womanhood, but this situation is culturally and socially

preconceived instead of being an individual experience. If we take "feminisation" in its literal sense, these novels have various motifs that make them part of a renewed interest in the feminine. Despite their slightly marginal situations, these characters are depicted as inhabiting a traditional world of femininity, with the narration paying great heed to mirrors, outfits, looks and the feminine condition of the upper middle class who must choose between an unsatisfactory, standardised role as housewife (which is expressed for example in Amanda's obsessive compulsive disorder in *Arlington Park*) or an unsatisfactory and unrewarding career. However, here again there is a disconnection between the plots and what is really at stake in these novels. Reduced to its bottom-line, the story of *Arlington Park* is too good to be true for the question of "the feminisation of writing": the London suburbanites driving their saloon cars to collect kids and shopping, weary of hosting parties for ungrateful neighbours that constitute their only social horizon, are nothing short of a stereotypical, middle-class woman in suburbia such as represented in films and series. Love, marriage, and weight loss are on the agenda.

Yet, all of Cusk's characters stop short of being the stereotypes they are expected to be: they do not fit into that frame of reference which is so ingrained and pervasive that it does not even need stating in the text. This is particularly true of her first heroine, who is a successful student who finds herself sharing a flat and going through an identity crisis:

> Agnes Day painted her face and starved herself; she shaved her legs and plucked her eyebrows and scrubbed the gravelly flesh on her thighs with a mitt of similar texture. She moisturised here and desiccated there, purged her skin of odour and oil and then force-fed it with creams and spray, as if hoping that one day it would give off of its own accord the exotic fragrance and softness which were now but briefly borrowed. […] Sometimes it seemed to her as if her body were in a constant state of revolt, maliciously engendering odour and ugliness, coarse hair sprouting through every pore, flesh puckering here and sagging there. She was vigilant and artful in stemming protuberance and decay, but subversion was all around.
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> Contrary to appearances, Agnes would like nothing more than to be natural, for she regarded this incessant pruning and weeding as burdensome. She did not see it as her womanly business to pluck and purge and preen. (*SA*, 17-18)

Something of the feminine masquerade[8], or what others might call gender performance (Butler 1999) is evoked here. However the character seems to be aware of impulses that are expected to remain subconscious. The use of the character's full name initially sets the tone for a description that emphasises the mechanical, illogical and systematic procedure that turns Agnes into a woman. The passage clearly seeks to expose the feminisation process by which a woman is born out of flesh. Parataxis imposes an internal rhythm that is in keeping with the binary or ternary beat that is created by the polysyndeton of "ands", in order to deny the pleasure that such a feminine activity is expected to foster. The real body that social moulding vainly tries to camouflage is exposed and what oozes shows a character that is disgusted and

[8] The expression is used in psychoanalysis, especially Lacanian theory, and Lacan is said to have used an earlier article by Joan Rivière to create his own version. See Stoîan Stoïanoff, "Lacan au feminin" (n.d.).

disgusting. The process of feminisation is turned into something sordid but inescapable, and it is clearly separated from "woman(hood)" by the last sentence. That is why we are not surprised when a little further down we read: "[s]he wore her hair long, a trick intended to clear up any queries as to her gender." (19) Although the character is clearly identified by everyone else, and the reader, as feminine it seems that the individual is at odds with her own gender, something which the narration cannot refrain from pointing out, virtually discrediting all female attributes: "Agnes took out a jacket and held it up. It hung elegantly from the scrawny neck of the coat-hanger, svelte and poised. It looked better without her." (41)

Humour enables Cusk to evoke the inappropriate quality of her characters' gender attributes and accessories. Yet it does not seem that cross-gender is what is at stake here. Cusk's characters seem to be coming to terms with their own individual inscription within that role and identity, whilst still being aware of the discrepancy between the feminine mask and their true sense of self.[9] Seen from another perspective, this could appear as a parody of the advice given in women's magazines on how to apply the good lotion in order to look good. The clinical, cynical look with which the narration portrays that feminine transformation points to its vacuity. It is clear in this passage that the character is trying to grapple with a place and a situation that society has slyly imposed on her with a series of selfless actions that are mechanically accomplished.

Saving Agnes is not a novel about gender confusion, but it questions the notion of femininity as beauty. Cusk thus stresses the physicality of the female body, a body that the character looks at from a distance, as a 'foreign body'. Inadequacy can be said to be a motif of her characters who, however, show no sign of their internal conflict: "[s]he had not been wearing underwear, and her flesh had looked both wizened and bloated, androgynous somehow, identifiable as female only by the bloodless lips of her genitals." (Cusk 1995, 28) As opposed to feminist explorations of gender, in the wake of Beauvoir's statement that "one is not born a woman, one rather becomes one," Cusk's anchorage in the real body, with its genitals, its internal movement, is trying to locate how the body is a situation, and gender the trap which awaits every person. This in turn positions Cusk in the general context of "women's writing"; she reinvests an area in which women tended to underline the corporeal nature of their experiences as a mode of protest, a risk taken after years of silencing.

What is striking in her fiction is that none of her characters are exemplary or seen as universal.[10] This is made clear in *The Country Life* when Stella realises that she can identify neither with Pamela, the landlady, nor Caroline, Pamela's daughter.

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[9] "Instead of feminine writing, it would be more apt to speak – regardless of the gender or sex of the biographical subject whose signature appears on the text – of a *feminization of writing*: a feminization produced each time a poetic or erotic sign exceeds the retaining/ containing frame of masculine signification with its rebellious surpluses (body, libido, pleasure, heterogeneity, multiplicity, etc.) in order to deregulate the majority discourse's thesis. Any literature practiced as a *dissidence of identity* with respect to the normalizing format of the masculine-paternal culture, any writing making itself impulsive, would deploy the minority and subversive (counterhegemonic) coefficient of the 'feminine'." (Richard 2004, 22)

[10] "Even if there is no universal behaviour in women that could correspond to other mammals, even if there are denatured, child-killers or indifferent mothers, and even if Sarah B. Hardy acknowledges the influence

> Pamela's physical presence immediately struck me as alien; not only in that she was as different from me as was (excluding, obviously, broader possibilities such as having only one leg) possible; but also in that I couldn't imagine what it would be like *to be her*. In looking at a man, this sensation might well be commonplace; but with a woman the problem becomes somewhat more visceral. (*CL*, 19, emphasis in original)

Once again Cusk relates the question of femininity with the body ("visceral"), by which she expresses the internal nature of that feeling. Moreover, the character's sense of self is first and foremost approached through references to her body, but not the feminine, beautiful body. Like Agnes's, this is a body that is always on the verge of becoming grotesque. "I looked positively wild." (69) The author's dark humour is based on an analogical language that tries to capture the feeling of otherness created by the observation of someone who should be the same. The word "alien" recurs further down when Stella meets the teacher of the child she is looking after: "I had found it hard enough to communicate with this curious creature as a professional; but as a woman, she seemed even more alien." (260) It seems that there is no universal experience of womanhood for Stella Benson, although she was raised on the assumption that it exists, a feminist prerogative that post-feminism has analysed in depths.[11] There is no common grounds for Stella to share some of Pamela's (or other women's) experience. Treated as a joke, Stella's inadequacy might be reduced to an unimportant element in the economy of the novel, since the latter seems to concentrate on the impending danger that surrounds the family life in the country. Yet I would tend to suggest that this plot, and the detective-like nature of Stella's investigation after she has found the press clippings pinned up in the post-office backroom, is the pre-text for the exploration of the solitude of being that awaits Stella at every moment:

> "[i]t's difficult for us chaps to remember to tidy up. We've got other things on our minds, fighting wars and running things and suchlike, what?" (says Mr Madden)/ I laughed enthusiastically at this, and was mortified to hear my laughter make its solo flight across the table. (122)

This feeling might well be reinforced by the fact that all the *au-pairs* that have worked for the Maddens seem to be interchangeable, the siblings having no idea that someone has replaced the previous one. It seems that this world run by feminine figures, or at least focused on them, uncovers the ruptures and differences which these women seem to have to come to terms with. Is feminism a good way out of solipsism into the collective or the political?

Not Feminist Enough?

Funnily enough, this internal feeling surfaces in conversation about feminism, in what seems to be, so to speak, a transformation of the private into the political. Indeed

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of historic, social and economic contexts on the maternal feeling […], the notion of maternal instincts always goes unquestioned." (Badinter 2010, 79-80)

[11] See Cusk's own treatment of it in the "Female Eunuch, 40 years on" (2010): "The difficulty for feminists has always lain in getting women to surrender the privacy of their discontent."

Agnes Day's friend, Nina, is an independent girl, who is undeterred by the feminist ideals she was brought up into. She has a "lecture" (*SA*, 2) ready for anyone who might not understand women's desire to conceal their bodies in the way Agnes does out of habit rather than conviction: "[w]omen don't necessarily want men to accept their hideous physical proclivities. We need a secret life. In fact, I can't think of anything worse than some post-feminist prat fawning over my body hair." (2)

Feminism is laughed away quite cruelly and crudely. Cusk is trying to represent the ambivalent feelings that it has created in young women who now believe they have a choice, although this choice always implies integrating "masculine values"[12]: when Agnes argues that "women could precipitate change from the heart of the patriarchal establishment," (56) her father's answer reveals how hard it is to make an informed decision about feminism and one that cannot be derided to boot: "[c]haps are more likely to listen to a pretty girl." (56) As these are not followed by narratorial comments, it is hard to know which opinion is favoured and Cusk seems to show the dead-end in which feminism might be. Feminism rubs shoulders with other ideological discourses, and Cusk's main characters seem to dread it like the plague. Agnes is so afraid to be swallowed by the ideology of feminism that she is ready to fight a lost battle with a rod for her own back. Once at college, she is approached by a feminist group and in an attempt to fend them off she says: "'I like having doors opened for me!' […] Thankfully this missile […] was shut down with consummate ease by her companions who became friendly in their relief that she had not mounted a stauncher defense." (54)

Violence can be experienced obliquely in the discourse. The first reference to feminism, when Nina converses with some random guy, could well pass unnoticed as the effect intended is rather to show the vacuity of relationships in the context of a party. But the question recurs in the novel: the "feminist lobby" (*SA*, 29) at university is said to be responsible for Agnes's rupture with the Catholic church, which Agnes had joined for community reasons rather than spiritual ones. The question seems so important that it is the object of a long development at the beginning of chapter 10, in which the narrator, under pretence of following Agnes's thoughts, constructs an essay in the ambivalent feelings feminism fosters and nourishes. Here again the comparison with religion and the question of the physicality of the body are broached in what seems to be a detached development whose function is metatextual. This chapter includes two episodes, one in which Agnes remembers being in Seville with her boyfriend John and lying in the dark because both were unable to sleep. The anecdote is rather odd because it deals with Agnes's feeling of being threatened by her partner's interest in her as the heat in Seville gives her an impression that their bodies are melting into each other. The narration then moves on to Agnes's brother's visit, a visit during which Agnes's feeling of estrangement towards her brother escalates until she discovers his role in sacking people, and they fall out. The chapter ends on Agnes's reflection on sisterhood, or rather the lack of a sister that she resents, prompting us to

[12] "We start by wanting to write in front of the father, the symbolic father, the missing father – not in front of the real father – in front of the dead father, therefore the ideal father, in order to please him… ." (Cixous 1990, 18)

believe that one of the thematic threads of the novel is the question of belonging and identity, which feminism brings to the foreground.

As Agnes looks at feminism with the distant look of humour ("The first thing she perceived about feminism was that it allowed women to be fat and ugly. As if such qualities were infectious, Agnes secretly put this idea to one side" 55), the narrator endows feminism with agency, as if the ideology was not to be found in individuals but as a monster lurking behind every woman and ready to use them as dinner: "Feminism had discovered Agnes in her first year at university and, recognising in her the potential for prime, dissenting flesh, had been prepared to fight long and hard for her soul." (54) Feminism is personified and yet strangely anonymised as a result. The passage sustains the metaphor of a ferocious beast ("scrap of meat"/ "red in tooth and claw", 54) in order to show the complex relationship between Agnes and her fellow "sisters". Agnes's "fear and loathing of her own sex" (54) leads her to accept the "trappings of the feminine stereotype [which she is] not particularly enamoured of." (55) Alternating between present reflexion and memories, Cusk constructs a passage that shows the hesitation of a character for whom feminism clearly does not stand alone as an ideology: religion, education, the advantages of a desired seclusion come into play for the subject. Feminism is perceived as that which jeopardises the subject and her individuality: "[l]ike aspirin, she found ideologies hard to swallow whole." (55) Feminism seems to be part of that discourse which, in the words of Barbero, which informed Nelly Richard's theory, constitutes power: "[i]t is not only a matter of power utilizing discourse as weapon, sophism, or blackmail, but rather of discourse forming an integral part of the plot of violence, control and struggle that constitutes the practice of power." (Richard 2004, 2) Further down she notes:

> [i]s it valid for women to construct an identity based on the notion that the masculine-dominant's 'other' is the 'proper' realm of the feminine? Might it not be instead that what is 'proper' to the feminine is the tension-filled, reformulation product of the cross between mechanisms of appropriation/ misappropriation/ counterappropriation that the dominating and the dominated confront in the interior of a culture whose registers of (hegemonic) power and resistance (subalternity) are always *intertwined*? (Richard 2004, 12, emphasis in original)

These mechanisms are seen at play in such a passage. Agnes seems to face and explore the conflicts within her, created by her gender, and its necessarily political implications. In *The Country Life*, Mrs Madden quite happily accepts the traditional load of domestic work: "She hesitated for a moment, hand to her forehead, as if contemplating a landscape of strictures and duties by which she suddenly realized herself to be surrounded." (*CL*, 119) However, as Stella points out, she may talk about what she does more than she actually acts (94): hence her reliance on the maid, or the "harridan [who] is very precious." (86) When Pamela says that she would "hate to lose her," Stella thinks: "[t]here was something accusatory about this comment, as if I might be liable to take Mrs Barker away and then forget where I'd put her." (89) Women and men in the family have traditional roles, with Mr Madden taking care of all things outside and Mrs Madden children and house. It is also Caroline's plight. But to "I'm a housewife," Stella's answer is an unsatisfactory "oh" that leads Caroline to attack feminism: "Are you one of these feminists?" (123) Caroline then engages in a

collection of clichés on the reasons why a woman she knew and her husband split up after the former decided to take a job, suggesting that a woman who works is undesirable: "I was quite shocked by Caroline's remarks and by the assurance with which she made them." (125) Here again, Cusk seems to favour no side, since Stella appears as confused by the episode as the reader.

Humiliation, disgust and the corporeality of womanhood are broached in both novels in a way that tends to attack most foundations of feminism by turning it into an ideology that is blind to the intimate, individual nature of woman's experience, as Cusk herself points out in her articles, or what Lacan claims to be the impossibility to speak of women in universal terms (Lacan 1975). As a result, what we can see here is both the hesitation of the self and a construction of an identity that is gendered, in which the situation of an individual is culturally determined and in conflict with her own sense of self.

Feminine Identity as Solitary Invention

Cusk's two novels can be read as experiments in what she later formalised in two articles published in *The Guardian*, in which she defends feminism and laments the way in which feminism has gradually lost ground in contemporary British society.

> A feminist is born out of her own sense of frustration and enclosure; she comes into existence in the same moment as – or for the very reason that – she realises she is trapped. It might be said that this is how people are very frequently politicised – they experience the colour of their skin, or their social class, or their religion as limitation – but the logic of the woman-trap and its interface with the world are uniquely complex. (Cusk 2010)

Feminism, like womanhood, is a construction and individuals must realise the fact before they can act upon it according to Cusk. The feminine world that these women inhabit functions as a common ground for their anxiety, their fears and their recognition. Gender identity is therefore shown to be a violent moment of awakening rather than a natural process. In *Saving Agnes*, Agnes's psyche is left with the imprint of her difference, something that her infuriating brother's presence keeps calling to her mind. Thus, despite the narrative technique whose main features are feminine (probing into the characters' inner thoughts, a plotless novel, a study in human relationships) and the omnipresence of a female character, femininity is first of all described as that which cannot be defined and therefore must be shaped. Thus Agnes remembers wanting to be a boy when she was a little girl and having a dream of being "in possession of a giant penis like an elephant's trunk" and being forced to "bundle it up beneath her skirt like a dark and terrible secret and walk around in mortal fear of its discovery." (*SA*, 44) Masculinity is described in grotesque terms and something embarrassing, to be put away. Inadequacy awaits this little girl who does not wear deodorant or bras, to the disarray of her parents (45), which leads us to think that femininity questions the notion of gender: "Agnes feared that, unable to conform to the specifications of either side, she would be deserted by both." (44) Thus Agnes feels that her identity was imposed on her without warning nor consideration for her personal choice:

> [h]er early ejection from the masculine world was remembered not as a gradual drifting away on a soft cloud of burgeoning femininity, but rather as a hideous eruption of deformities accompanied by a simultaneous rejection from the society of her brother Tom and his friends. (44)

In *The Country Life*, gender confusion is perhaps less at stake but it is replaced by a suspicion of the very concept of identity which Stella controls by choosing the moment when she will disappear: "when my parents eventually called at the scene they would find nothing to displease them; no trace, in short, of myself." (*CL*, 5) Although the erasure is quite significant, it is treated lightly, as if she were taking a load off her shoulders, the burden of having to be: "[w]hat could without exaggeration be called the destruction of all evidence that I had ever existed. The purge was far from easy." (*CL*, 5) Funnily enough, it is not her emotional response that she is describing here, but the act of deleting all the minute details of her existence. Although the process is similar to Agnes's, it is a question of constructing and building up an image that the character can now identify with, in this case the nothingness of being. Hence her choice of a job that she is incapable of accomplishing (she does not have the driving licence that is required) and where she is bound to be fired, or to quit. Hence also, the choice of a job that inscribes her in a list of other girls that have disappeared. Stella's behaviour is equally inadequate when compared with Agnes's. For example when Stella goes into the living-room wearing inappropriate shorts (72), it is not so much the question of her difference as the question of her existence that is raised, because she simply should not be there, and if her gender matters, it is part of an overall question raised at her very being. She eavesdrops on Pamela conversing with one of her friends, talking about Stella and Martin, the boy she will have to look after, and the way the boy reacts to the change of carer: "[d]o you know, I don't think he even notices when we get a new one," (76) says Pamela, implying that the number of *au pair* is quite impressive and that their existence is that of their position rather than their subjective identity. Even their femininity is denied: "God, I must be the only woman in the world who doesn't need to worry about her husband having it off with the au pair." (76) But she might worry about her sons.

Stella's position, both professionally and within the family, provides us with a fruitful metaphor to understand her identity crisis that leads her to be unsure of the "boundaries of her self." (109) Left alone in the house she has to answer the phone and introduces herself as “Stella” which the man she's speaking with finds insufficient: "[w]hat are you?" (136) Stella is said to be surprised by this question, probably because of the "what" in lieu of the usual "who": "[i]t was difficult to know what sort of information the man required." (136) Of course, the man's reaction, who turns out to be Pamela’s son is "what happened to Colette?" (136) Stella therefore has to make do with the non-existence of her individuality: she is one in a million, perhaps less, and is sentenced to repeat what others have done, by getting sacked as well at the end of the novel. Commenting a quotation by Cusk, M. Tang states: "[Beauvoir] famously located in the female body the principal source of women's historical oppression, even as she asserted the significant role played by the body in defining subjectivity." (Tang 2013) In her narrative, Cusk explores the construction of

subjectivity through the female body, an exploration which she has gradually exposed in essays published in the press. While her novels depict plots and themes that reflect the existence of a highly-feminised world, her female characters have to come to terms with their own femininity, something which the image in the mirror, the body image, enables Cusk to represent. The underlying criticism of feminism and feminine behaviour is in keeping with her Beauvoirian perspective as it seeks in the history of women's oppression the grounds for a culturally and socially constructed commonness of experience instead of proclaiming it as fact. Cusk's female characters turn out to be misfits in the sense that they are never where they are supposed to be, nor completely correspond to what they are expected to be, as can be seen in their gradual drifting away from relatives and friends to whom they are not subjected. Thereby they repeat, to use Cusk's way of putting it, a set of behaviour and feelings of anxiety towards their own being that is the result of their position as subjects.

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